

# Southeast Asian Traditions in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The Philippines today is home to over one hundred different ethnolinguistic groups. These range from the Arta, a tiny group of Negrito hunter-gatherers with only about a dozen remaining speakers, living under highly adverse conditions in Quirino Province, to the 12,000,000 or so Tagalogs, a very diverse group primarily professing Catholicism, centered around Metro-Manila and surrounding provinces, but also widely dispersed throughout the archipelago. In between there are a wide range of traditional societies living in isolated areas, such as in the steep mountains of the Cordillera Central and the Sierra Madre of Northern Luzon, still attempting to follow their pre-Hispanic cultural practices amid the onslaught of modern civilization. And in the Southern Philippines there are the societies, who, having converted to Islam only shortly before Magellan arrived, today feel a closer allegiance to Mecca than they do to Manila.

These peoples, despite the disparate nature of their cultures, all have one thing in common. They share a common linguistic tradition. All of their languages belong to the Austronesian language family, whose sister languages are spread from Madagascar off the east coast of Africa, through the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago, scattered through the mountains of South Vietnam and Kampuchea as far north as Hainan Island and Taiwan, and out into the Pacific through the hundreds of islands of the Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian areas.

The question of how all these languages are related to one another, where their parent language may have been spoken, and what the migration routes were that their ancestors followed to bring them to their present locations has occupied scholars for well over a hundred years. The pace

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of research however has quickened over the last quarter century, with various universities establishing active research programs in Austronesian studies, and a series of international conferences on Austronesian studies being regularly held since 1974.

Today, although the general outlines of the movement of Austronesian peoples over the last 6,000 years is clear, there is still considerable disagreement among scholars over many of the details of the subgrouping relationships among the languages in the family.

The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of the occupation of the Philippines by Austronesian speaking peoples as it is understood by many scholars, and to discuss the degree to which Philippine linguistic traditions ultimately derive from mainland Southeast Asia.

It is useful to begin this story by dividing the prehistory of the Philippines into two periods, which we can refer to as B.A., and A.A., standing respectively for "Before the Arrival of the Austronesians", and "After the Arrival of the Austronesians".

In the Philippines today there are two fairly clearly distinct racial types. One type, represented by the Negritos of Luzon, Negros, Panay, Palawan, and Mindanao, have certain genetic and physical characteristics which link them to the Melanesian inhabitants of New Guinea and surrounding areas, the aboriginal groups of Australia, and other Negrito groups of the Malay Peninsula and the Andaman Islands. As a group these peoples have been called Australoid, and are generally considered to be the original inhabitants of the whole of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago, as well as the Philippines, Taiwan, the Melanesian Islands and Australia. They are possibly the descendants of a *Homo erectus* population which lived at least in the area we now know as Java, a half million years ago.

The other type, represented by the non-Negrito populations of the Philippines, have genetic and physical characteristics which link them to populations in Japan, China, and surrounding areas. As a group, these peoples have been called Mongoloid.

The "B.A. Period of Philippine Prehistory", involves only the Australoid population, the "A.A. Period of Philippine Prehistory", involves both the Australoid population and the Mongoloid populations of the Philippines.

## **The B.A. Period of Philippine Prehistory**

The earliest archaeological remains of human habitation in the Philippines were found in Tabon Cave, on the southwestern coast of

Palawan Island<sup>2</sup>. They have been dated to around 22,000 B.C., and consist of a frontal bone and a mandible, the characteristics of which suggest that they belonged to an individual who was phenotypically more similar to the Australoid populations of the region than to the Mongoloid. This individual must be the earliest ancestor yet discovered of today's Australoid population of the Philippines, the Negritos.

Today, only about twenty-five distinct Negrito groups exist in the Philippines, but in the distant past, prior to the arrival of the Austronesians, the archipelago must have been home to perhaps hundreds of such groups. Archaeological excavations of what must have been Negrito sites, show that these peoples were hunter-gatherers and fishermen and possessed a very simple technology. The only tools they had were simple stone flakes, or small stone blade tools, although other groups may have used tools made from shell and bone. They did not practice agriculture, they had no metals, or pottery and no knowledge of weaving. They probably exploited the natural resources of the coastal regions and the river valleys, and were probably intimately familiar as well with the plants and animals of the monsoon and equatorial rain forests of the mountain regions.

What about their languages? Today, the Negritos all speak Austronesian languages (Reid 1987, 1989a). If we accept the hypothesis, to be discussed more fully in the next section, that Austronesian-speaking peoples only started moving into the Philippines less than 6,000 years ago, we are forced to conclude that prior to their arrival the Negritos must have been speaking languages that were not Austronesian. The situation was probably not unlike that which we currently find in New Guinea, where between eight hundred and a thousand languages are still spoken, many of them appearing to be completely unrelated to others in the area. Because of the immense periods of time (probably over 40,000 years) that people have been living there, and the forced isolation that the steep mountain valleys placed upon the intrepid hunters who first moved into them to establish new hunting grounds, there was probably little contact between adjoining groups and their languages would quickly have begun to differentiate from those of their neighbors.

Genetic studies of the blood types of Negritos in Luzon and Mindanao suggest that they have been separated for between twenty and thirty thousand years (Omoto 1987). Over such great periods of time, any common language that they may originally have had, would also have

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<sup>2</sup> For most of the archaeological information reported in this paper I am indebted to the excellent syntheses of Bellwood (1985).

developed into languages that today would have appeared to be completely unrelated.

In some areas, especially where the geographical boundaries were reasonably easily surmountable, adjacent groups may have been able to maintain contact with each other, and this would have slowed down the rate of language change, so that by the end of the B.A. period, some areas such as, for example, the Cagayan Valley, or the thin coastal strip between the Sierra Madre and the Pacific Ocean possibly spoke languages that could be considered to belong to the same family. One study exists that suggests that such was the case (Reid 1990a). A number of words are shared between some of the Negrito groups of Luzon, that are not found in any non-Negrito Austronesian language. These may be remnants of the languages that were spoken in the area prior to the arrival of the Austronesians. However, not surprisingly, none of these words has yet been shown to be similar to words of the same or similar meanings in the Negrito languages of Mindanao, or in other languages spoken by Australoid peoples outside the Philippines.

### **The A.A. Period of Philippine Prehistory**

Around 3,500 B.C., the Negritos of Northern Luzon discovered that people unlike any they had seen before had arrived on their shores. They were not black-skinned like themselves but had fair, reddish skin. They had straight hair, their bodies were tattooed with intricate designs, and they spoke a language that was unintelligible to the Negritos. Their arrival had a tremendous impact on the lives of the Negritos, ultimately revolutionizing the way they lived. The Austronesians had arrived and life for the Negritos would never be the same. The lands that had once been their own unrestricted hunting grounds, now had to be shared with the newcomers.

But the newcomers were not just hunters and gatherers, they had a way of life that must have fascinated the Negritos. They must have noticed the strange clothing the newcomers wore, made of cloth pounded out of the bark of trees, or woven on a backloom from thread spun out of the fiber of plants. The newcomers knew how to make beautiful polished adzes and other stone tools, far more sophisticated than the Negritos had ever used. And they used them for cutting down trees, for making substantial houses and for hollowing out logs for canoe bodies. They also brought with them dogs and domesticated pigs.

The Negritos must have watched with wonder as they felled wide stretches of forest land, burned them clear, and planted millet and rice. Some of the Austronesians may also have been familiar with wet rice

planting techniques and have brought with them seed that would germinate in the warmer climate than that from which they had come. Then after the rice had ripened they watched as the Austronesians brought out their sharp, stone cutting blades and harvested the rice, pounded the husk off in mortars, and cooked it as food in the clay pots they had brought with them. It was a completely foreign way of life.

The Austronesians themselves must have been familiar with peoples similar to the Negritos, who probably also inhabited the homeland from which they had come. They soon developed good relations with the local inhabitants, recognizing their superior skills at tracking the game in the forests, and gathering the local foods that they relied on for sustenance during periods when their crops were adjusting to the local environmental conditions and harvests were scarce. They also recognized that the Negritos could be persuaded to help them in the difficult tasks of clearing the forest and similar work in exchange for a share of the harvest. Carbohydrates were in very short supply in the tropical rain forests of Northern Luzon (Headland and Reid 1989, 1991), and the Negritos quickly acquired a taste for the new foods that the Austronesians had brought with them.

So the Negritos took to living close to the newcomers. Some groups called the newcomers *Ugdin* or *Uldin*, a name that probably referred to their skin color. It meant 'red' in the language of the Austronesians. Other groups called the newcomers *Agani*, which meant 'harvester'. The Austronesians called the Negritos *Agta*, or *Alta*. Relationships between the groups were sometimes good and sometimes bad. When they were good, the children of the groups played together and the Negrito children learned to speak fluently the language of the Austronesian children. And when they grew up, they eventually stopped speaking the language of their parents and used only the now familiar tongue of the Austronesians. When relationships were bad though, the groups separated, and with their separation the language of the two groups began to develop dialectal differences and ultimately in some cases the dialects became completely separate languages, so that the groups could no longer understand one another. Some Negrito groups preferred to maintain their own independence, and retained their old hunting and gathering lifestyles, taking from the Austronesians only what they needed of food and other items in exchange for forest products that they could gather with ease.

Other Negrito groups married into the Austronesian population until they were completely assimilated, leaving behind traces of their genetic inheritance in the curly heads and darker skin color that is commonly seen among many of the Austronesian groups today. Today the same

process continues. In Villaviciosa, a small town near Bangued, Abra, there is a tiny group of people, who identify themselves as Agta, but who no longer speak any language other than Ilokano, and who are physically indistinguishable from Ilokanos from the surrounding population. Similarly, the Arta Negritos of Villa Santiago, Quirino Province, who have maintained a language that their ancestors must have learned several thousand years ago (not without change, of course), have finally come to the end of their existence as a separate group. Only three couples still speak the language to their children, the others are married to either Ilokanos or other Negritos who speak a different language. Within a generation, they will be completely assimilated, and the Arta language will have disappeared (Reid 1989b).

As the Austronesians increased in number, they moved south through Luzon and ultimately occupied all of the major islands of what is now the Philippines. Within a relatively short period perhaps as short as 500 years, they had moved beyond the Philippines, one group taking up residence in what is now Borneo, the other moving into the Talaud Islands and into Eastern Indonesia.

Evidence for the story as I have outlined it above comes from two sources. One is archaeological, the other is linguistic.

## **Archaeological Evidence**

Archaeological sites from the Philippines and areas to the south in Indonesia which have been dated prior to around 3,500 B.C. show none of the cultural materials which gradually begin to appear in sites that are dated subsequent to this. Several early sites, such as the caves at Musang in northern Luzon and Tabon in the south of Palawan have two distinct cultural levels (Thiel 1984-85:121, Fox 1970). The lower one gives evidence of occupation by ancestors of today's Negrito population of the areas, with simple flake and blade tools. The higher level contained pottery, ground stone adzes, stone tools for harvesting grain, spinning thread, beating barkcloth, some possible tattooing chisels, and a variety of earrings and other ornaments of personal decoration made from shell, jade, fired clay, and polished stone. These artifacts are generally considered to be evidence of a movement of people with a Neolithic culture into the area, and they characterize the shift from the B.A. period of Philippine prehistory to the A.A. period.

There are no Neolithic sites which have been dated earlier than 2,500 B.C. in areas south of the Philippines in Indonesia or Malaysia. The earliest pottery south of the Philippines has been excavated from sites in the Talaud Islands south of Mindanao, in southwestern Sulawesi, and in

eastern Timor. However, in Taiwan, there are a number of sites that have been excavated along the western coast of the island that have been dated from about 4,300 B.C. to 2,500 B.C. that contain rough cord marked pottery, adzes and other artifacts of the so-called Tap'enk'eng culture, that mark them as early Neolithic sites (Bellwood 1985:213). The archaeological evidence then suggests that the people who first moved into the Philippines bearing pottery and adzes, and the knowledge of how to make them came not from the south, but from the north.

Artifacts dug from the ground can tell us nothing about what they were called by the people who used them. However, comparison of languages spoken in these areas today does enable us to reconstruct terms for the parent language from which they descended, a language we call Proto-Austronesian. Furthermore it allows us to draw conclusions about the general area where that parent language may have been spoken, although it is not possible by linguistic means to place a date on when that language may have been spoken. As we shall see in the next section, the results of comparative studies that have been done in recent years allow us to make a probable association of the language Proto-Austronesian with bearers of the Tap'engk'eng culture in Taiwan.

## **Linguistic Evidence**

All of the aboriginal inhabitants of Taiwan speak Austronesian languages, genetically related to the languages of the Philippines. We know they are genetically related, that is they descended from a single common ancestral language, because there are sets of words shared between the languages that not only have the same or similar meanings, but the sounds of the words are systematically relatable. Such recurring sound correspondences could not have developed accidentally. They can only be the result of inheritance from an earlier common language.

Using the techniques of comparative-historical linguistics which were developed during the latter half of the nineteenth century to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European (the parent language of the Germanic, Slavic, Celtic, Italic and other language families of Europe and India), the sound systems and much of the grammar of Proto-Austronesian and the parent languages of various Austronesian subgroups such as Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, Proto-Oceanic and so on, have been reconstructed. In addition a large vocabulary of words that these early Austronesian languages must have used has been reconstructed.

There are several ways that linguists can arrive at the possible homeland of a family of languages. One method is to look for the area of greatest diversity in the family on the assumption that where there are a great

many languages in a relatively limited geographical area, and the languages are very different from one another, they must have been in the area for a greater period of time than in areas where there are fewer languages and the languages are not greatly different from one another. Polynesian languages for example are quite similar to one another, even though they are spread across a vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, because they only began to diverge from their parent language, Proto-Polynesian, less than two thousand years ago.

The area of greatest linguistic diversity in the Austronesian family is not in Taiwan, as we might expect if that was the homeland, given the six thousand years or so since the parent language began to diversify. There are only a dozen or so extant Austronesian languages spoken there, belonging to three different subgroups, whereas in Eastern Indonesia and the Melanesian island area there are literally hundreds of languages spoken, leading some to suggest that it was in the latter areas where Proto-Austronesian was spoken.

However other factors can create linguistic diversity other than simple length of time since the languages began to diverge from one another. Where they are in contact with other unrelated languages, as happened in the New Guinea and Melanesian island areas, many local changes can take place in the grammar, sound systems and vocabulary of the language, because of influence from the contact languages (Grace 1992).

The same factor, language contact, can have the opposite effect if the two languages are genetically related. They tend to borrow from one another, levelling the differences between them, resulting in languages that appear more alike than one would expect given the length of time since they began to diverge from one another. This is no doubt what has happened in Taiwan. Moreover we know that within the historical period a considerable number of Austronesian languages on Taiwan have disappeared as their speakers became assimilated into the more dominant Chinese immigrant populations on the island.

Another way to determine the possible homeland of a family is to examine the words that have been reconstructed for the parent language for clues as to the nature of the geographical location where the speakers of that language lived. Several studies have been done which suggest Taiwan as the homeland, rather than say Melanesia or the Indonesia-Malaysia area, or Vietnam-Kampuchea in mainland Southeast Asia (Blust 1984-85, Zorc 1990). Some of the relevant terms that describe the topography, weather and similar environmental conditions, flora, fauna, and knowledge of the sea are:



- *towards the interior; towards the sea; earthquake; northwest monsoon; southwest monsoon; north wind, cold weather; typhoon*
- *bamboo; rattan; pine tree; pandanus; imperata cylindrica grass; fern; nettle; betel chew; millet; rice plant; sugarcane; taro*
- *deer; dog; monkey; pangolin; wild pig; domesticated pig; buffalo; dove; hornbill; freshwater eel*
- *sand; surf; crab; stingray; shark; mullet*

Blust (*ibid* p. 54) states, "The AN migrations appear to have begun in a tectonically unstable region with distinct seasonal temperature variations within the Pacific typhoon belt... The overall picture that emerges is thus consistent with a homeland in Taiwan or the adjacent mainland of China, but is not consistent with such areas as Vietnam-Kampuchea, New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, or Indonesia (which lies outside the typhoon belt)."

A third type of linguistic data that can help determine the homeland of a language family is phonological. Certain sound changes tend to be unidirectional, for example, an [s] can change to an [h], but the reverse does not occur. In the Austronesian languages outside of Taiwan, [h] occurs in a number of words whose cognates are pronounced with an [s] in Taiwan, from which it is possible to infer that the forms in the Taiwan Austronesian languages are older. One of the sounds that has been reconstructed for Proto-Austronesian can be represented as \*L. A number of languages in Taiwan retain this sound as a kind of fricative [l]. In all the Austronesian languages outside Taiwan, words which originally contained this sound have either a lateral [l] or an [n]. The lateral [l] appears at the beginning of such words, whereas an [n] appears at the middle or at the end of such words. This type of change is known as a "split merger" and can only occur in one direction. It implies that all Austronesian languages outside of Taiwan, the group that is now referred to by many linguists as Malayo-Polynesian, have innovated the change, and that the languages in Taiwan that have fricative [l] in these words have retained the original pronunciation.

One other fact of a phonological nature that is supportive of a Taiwan homeland has to do with the form of some of the pronouns. For Proto-Austronesian, it is necessary to reconstruct several possessive pronouns. They are \*aken *mine*, \*amen *ours (exclusive)*, and \*iten *ours (inclusive)*. These are commonly found in the Austronesian languages of Taiwan. The forms are obviously based on the subject pronouns \*aku *I*, \*kami *we (exclusive)*, and \*kita *we (inclusive)*. For Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, the parent of all the Austronesian languages outside Taiwan, one form is

different. Instead of \*iten, it is necessary to reconstruct \*aten. It is apparent that the latter form is the innovated form, the first vowel has been changed from [i] to [a] so that each of the possessive pronouns would begin with the same vowel. Once again, we find the Taiwan Austronesian languages retaining the older form, and the languages outside Taiwan having the more recent, innovated form. Several other pieces of linguistic evidence of the same type give further support to the hypothesis that Taiwan was the original homeland of the Austronesian language family.

In the early part of this paper, I mentioned that the first Austronesian newcomers to the Philippines were agriculturalists, bringing with them rice and millet. Some scholars still maintain that rice is a much more recent introduction to the Philippines than the date of 3,500 B.C. for initial Austronesian settlement would suggest, and that it was introduced not from Taiwan, but through Malaysia and Indonesia, northward into the Philippines and Taiwan (Chang 1984-85). Part of the reason for this is that the earliest rice remains in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines do not predate about 1,500 B.C., and that millet is a more important cereal crop in Taiwan today than is rice. However, the earliest rice remains have been found in the northern part of the Philippines, and recent excavations in Taiwan have found rice remains which are older by some 500 years (Wang 1984, Li 1983).

There is clear linguistic evidence that Proto-Austronesians were rice agriculturalists, and that they brought this knowledge with them when they expanded into the Philippines and beyond. There are reconstructed terms not only for 'rice plant', but also for 'harvested rice', 'cooked rice', 'rice stubble in the field', 'rice husk', and 'winnow'.

## Conclusion

The archaeological and linguistic evidence outlined above leads inevitably to the conclusion that the initial Austronesian settlements in the Philippines probably came from Taiwan. This conclusion runs counter to that traditionally taught in the Philippines that Filipinos are of the "Malay Race", and that they are descendants of either "Proto-Malay" or "Deutero-Malay" migrations into the country from the south. There is no evidence at all to support such a view of the migration of Austronesian peoples. In fact, the Austronesian populations in the Malay Peninsula and in Mainland Southeast Asia are probably the result of expansions from Southwest Borneo as late as the third or fourth century B.C. (Blust 1984-85:57), well after their Austronesian cousins had settled islands as far east as Samoa in the Pacific.

The origins of the people in Taiwan who left behind the artifacts recovered from the Tap'enk'eng sites, and who were probably the speakers of the language we call Proto-Austronesian, are clear from the archaeological record, but because of the time depth involved (at least six or seven thousand years ago) the linguistic evidence is somewhat obscure. The archaeological evidence clearly points to an origin in the adjoining South China region, probably in what is now Fujian or Zhejiang provinces. Bellwood (1985:219) notes that "the totality of potting knowledge found in the early island cultures was already present in this region a millennium before the beginnings of Austronesian expansion." In addition, rice agriculture was being practiced for at least a thousand years in areas to the south of the Yangtze River, before the ancestors of the Proto-Austronesians moved across the straits to Taiwan.

There are no Austronesian languages spoken in the South China area. There are however, a considerable number of languages belonging to the family known as Tai-Kadai, to which the national languages of Thailand and Laos belong. These languages show a number of similarities in grammar and lexicon to the Austronesian languages. Although it has not been possible to state a set of clearly recurring sound correspondences between the Austronesian and Tai-Kadai families which would firmly establish their genetic relationship, the number and type of similarities are too great to simply be coincidental. If the similarities are just the result of borrowing and not inherited features from some earlier protolanguage (Proto-Austro-Tai), it would still be necessary to place the ancestors of the Proto-Austronesians in the South China area, to account for the language contact which would have resulted in the borrowing (Benedict 1975, Reid 1984-85, 1985).

The South China area may well have also been the homeland of another family of languages that also show unmistakable resemblances to the Austronesian languages. This is the Austroasiatic family of languages, whose members include Vietnamese and Khmer, the national language of Kampuchea. Research continues to strengthen the association of the Austroasiatic and Austronesian languages, and attempts are being made to reconstruct what may have been their parent language (Proto-Austrie) (Reid 1990b, 1991, 1992).

For the origins of Philippine languages then, it is necessary to look not to the south, but to the north, to Taiwan and ultimately to South China and adjoining areas of Southeast Asia. It is from thence that Philippine linguistic traditions ultimately derive.

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